

https://www.coastalpoint.com/lifestyle/health/here-s-how-physical-therapy-can-help-you-fight-chronic-pain/article_44d86a40-851a-11ec-96ec-c39eee824900.html

Here's how physical therapy can help you fight chronic pain

By Bob Cairo | Special to the Coastal Point

Feb 3, 2022



Many people suffer with chronic pain. Physical therapy can help address some of the issues involved.

Coastal Point | Stock image

People who suffer with chronic pain have a terrible time. It dominates every waking hour. Patients have told me they have no quality of life, and they feel like they are literally being tortured. Unfortunately, chronic pain is far more common than most people realize.

Chronic pain is among the most common persistent medical conditions in the U.S. In fact, chronic pain is the single leading reason why patients see a doctor. According to an article published in the journal *Pain*, researchers from Brigham & Women's Hospital and Mass Eye & Ear reported that the number of people suffering from chronic pain comes to about 50.2 million. That translates to 1 of every 5 adults in the country battling chronic pain.

And those numbers come from a pretty darn reliable source. The analysis is from the data from the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

The cost of chronic pain comes in many forms. There is the serious human cost that this kind of suffering takes from people who are dealing with chronic pain. There is the loss in terms of productivity, which comes to some \$300 billion a year. Now, think of the additional costs that come with medical treatments.

But the real cost can't be computed. It's that human cost from the daily struggle that few people can begin to really imagine, and that's why it's important to understand what chronic pain is, what causes it and how physical therapy can play a very important role.

We all can understand that no two people are alike, so every person can be impacted by chronic pain differently. What we do know is that people facing this daily intense problem report decreased levels of activity that literally change the

way they live. It destroys their quality of life because the simplest tasks associated with what they do every day is beyond challenging.

The definition of chronic pain is often described by medical professionals as pain that lasts more than 3 months. It happens when your brain keeps getting signaled by your body that there is a pain problem. When your brain gets the alert, it processes the signal as a threat to your health and well-being. And that chronic pain signal is not the same kind of signal that is sent to your brain from the typical type of pain associated with an everyday sort of injury that has a healing curve and then you move on. Your brain literally knows the difference.

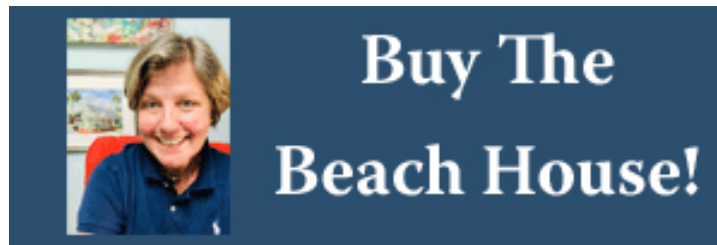
Sadly, chronic pain usually brings with it all kinds of other complications, too. It's no wonder that so many people who have chronic pain develop issues with anxiety, mood swings and depression. Chronic pain can also trigger sleep disruption and impacts your appetite. This is not how anyone wants to lose weight, because it totally upends a person's intake of proper vitamins and nutrition.

The challenge for doctors is getting to the root of the problem. The diagnosis isn't easy, because there are so many potential causes. It can result from a traumatic injury, a sprained back, or migraines and cluster headaches. Many illnesses or diseases can also be the cause. Chronic pain can come from osteoarthritis, diabetes mellitus, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer, neuropathy (pain that comes from nerve or tissue injury) and amputations.

The list goes on and on, and that's why the frustration patients feel is also felt by their doctors. No doctor wants to see anyone suffering, but there are many cases of chronic pain where there is no clear cause. Your body is telling you it's hurting and is alerting you that it needs help. So, how do you get the help you need?

You know what you have to do. The most important first step is to get an appointment with your doctor. Go to your appointment with all the information you can provide to help your doctor figure out what is going on. Write everything down. When did your problem begin?

Think about how you can answer when your doctor asks you to describe your pain. Don't worry about how it will sound. Every person feels pain in their own way, so think of how you can best help your doctor understand what you are going through. Where does the pain occur? Is it a stabbing? Is it a dull pain or is it a sharp pain? Is it a burning sensation or an aching sensation? Does the pain come and go, or is it constant? Do you notice at some times more than others?



Don't forget to write down all the medications you may be taking and any supplements, including vitamins. With all that information, the doctor has needed information about your situation. Your doctor may order tests to help reach a diagnosis.

Your doctor may also decide to call on other health professionals, and that is nothing to be surprised about, because tackling chronic pain often can require a combination of expertise. Don't be surprised if your doctor refers you to a physical therapist, because many medical professionals will tell you that physical therapy is often one of the best answers when you have chronic pain.

Pain relief through physical therapy is based on the in-depth training and knowledge that stems from the fact that everything works together in your body and different issues impact the body in more than one way. That's why physical

therapists are expert in treating pain and the source of pain. Physical therapists work to address ongoing chronic pain management and are focused on the big picture to help with your relief, your movement and functionality. And keep in mind, physical therapists are also often looking at homework to keep the momentum going around your visits and the long-term aspects of controlling the pain.

I want to return to another point I have shared with you before, because I can't tell you this enough. I want you to be an informed consumer. What I am telling you here is to ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask about your physical therapist's qualifications. You should feel confident.

You've heard me tell you before here in the Coastal Point that my treatment approach with my patients very much involves an ongoing dialogue. I want my patients to understand what we are doing together and why. I want my patients to feel comfortable that they can share with me, ask me questions and be honest about what is going on with them. I know it makes a big difference.

So, what can you expect when you go to your physical therapist? Your first visit will likely start with an examination and the kind of conversation I was just describing. Your physical therapist will create a treatment plan that is customized based on your particular needs.

As part of your treatment plan, your physical therapist may include a combination of strengthening exercises, pain-relieving exercises and some low-impact aerobic exercises. Your physical therapist may also work on other areas of body mechanics and even your posture. Your physical therapist will also very likely be looking at problems of weakness or stiffness that could be adding to your pain and functionality issues. You can expect that your physical therapist will likely include hands-on, manual therapy as part of your overall program.

You need to keep in mind that physical therapy includes a variety of treatments and approaches. That means that, just because you may not find results with one approach or method, doesn't mean it's not working. There are so many different treatments available that what it really means is another method might be available that may provide the relief you need from your pain.

The goal of this is all about the bottom line, and that's helping to get control of your chronic pain and healing. It's about looking at the pain causes and your pain response, restoring your flexibility and normal functioning as much as possible. It's also about improving your endurance and the stability of your joints and improving your quality of life.

It might surprise you to learn that your physical-therapy program goals may also often include helping you reduce the amount of pain medication you require through the improvements physical therapy can provide. Doctors and physical therapists are well aware of the fact that chronic pain has been one of the big causes driving the opioid epidemic.

I have told you this before, but it's worth repeating: You have to be all-in on working with your physical therapist. Nothing happens without an investment in time and effort, so you need to be committed to working with your physical therapist during your visit. And if you are given exercises to do at home, you need to do them. The reality is the less you move, the more pain you will have, so think about that when your physical therapist talks to you about doing exercises at home and an ongoing exercise program. It won't always be easy to make yourself move, because you're hurting, but it is worth it.

There's one other thing I want you to keep in mind: You are not alone in this battle, so don't give up on yourself. Your doctor and physical therapists like me believe in the value of your life. Your life matters, and it's the quality of your life that is worth

fighting for, so reach out and get the help you need.



Bob Cairo is a licensed physical therapist at Tidewater Physical Therapy. He can be reached by calling (302) 537-7260.